



**Sunday, November 26, 2023**

**Speaker:** Bob Stephens

**Scripture:** Luke 5:12-16

**Sermon Title:** Seeking solitude for the purpose of prayer

Good morning. Dave's [Breukelaar] prayer mentioned that Advent season is upon us, officially beginning next Sunday. With that, Pastor John has pushed pause on the series on the book of Acts and looking at the early church as we find its story there. I want this morning just to take us on a little short journey into the other book that's also written by the same writer who wrote the book of Acts, and that's the Gospel of Luke. And, specifically, we're going to explore what Luke records there of the example that Jesus sets for us of seeking solitude. For the purpose of prayer, I thought Dave was going to preach my sermon when he started out with, "Be still and know that I am God." We're going to be looking at a story to begin with in the Gospel of Luke chapter 5. If you turn there, I encourage you that you would leave your Bible or your Bible app open because we're going to touch down on a number of different places in this gospel as we go along. Let's read **Luke 5:12-16**.

### **Jesus Heals a Man With Leprosy**

**12** While Jesus was in one of the towns, a man came along who was covered with leprosy.<sup>[a]</sup> When he saw Jesus, he fell with his face to the ground and begged him, "Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean."

**13** Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. "I am willing," he said. "Be clean!" And immediately the leprosy left him.

**14** Then Jesus ordered him, "Don't tell anyone, but go, show yourself to the priest and offer the sacrifices that Moses commanded for your cleansing, as a testimony to them."

**15** Yet the news about him spread all the more, so that crowds of people came to hear him and to be healed of their sicknesses. **16** But Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed.

Join me in praying for our time together. Father, we thank You for Your presence among us. Thank You for Your Word. Thank You for the opportunity to open our hearts and our minds to allow You to speak to us and we pray that that's exactly what will happen this morning as we sit before You. in Christ's name. Amen.

Seeking solitude. Let me define what we mean by that term. I'm talking about a spiritual discipline, a habit in which we remove ourselves from other people and as many sources of distraction as possible for the specific purpose of spending a certain amount of time devoted to just being fully present with the Lord. Gary Thomas wrote, "Solitude is the place we create in our lives for listening." As such, it's a discipline that really cuts against the grain of our natural instinct, our natural instinct being to fill our lives with busyness with more and more and more. It's what so often gives us our meaning. But in doing so, we often drown out God's voice with noise.

Now, right off the bat, I realize that seeking solitude may seem like a counterintuitive topic for this time of year and for a couple of reasons. For one reason, the Christmas season is a particularly busy time for many people. So even the thought of suggesting and just adding another item to your calendar, one more obligation to an already overwhelming to-do list, isn't very appealing. You may think, "Well, this is a nice idea. Let me file it away as a possible New Year's resolution. But for now, it's not going to happen." On the other hand, for many of us, the Christmas season can be an extremely lonely time for one reason or another. And so, solitude is something to actually be sought after. It sounds like the last thing the lonely person wants to consider. It's my hope, however, this morning that we'll find, as we explore this, that seeking solitude is not an added burden to the busy. It's actually an antidote to the unchecked and unexamined busyness of our lives. Likewise, it's not something to further isolate the lonely.

As Mark Buchanan wrote in the book, *The Rest of God*, "Here's the richest irony about solitude. It's a cure for loneliness." But most of all, the subject should interest us simply because, as we're about to see, it was clearly something that mattered to Jesus. And if God in the flesh considered it important, shouldn't we?

Three things we're going to look at as we consider the place that solitude played for Jesus as we find him in Luke's gospel, and all three of those are conveniently right here in this single statement at the end of our reading. First of all, we're going to look at Jesus' practice of seeking solitude. It was something he often did. We'll try to identify some of the purposes that solitude played in his life and ministry, all of which were related to prayer. And then thirdly, we're going to see that solitude was not something that just happened for him. He had to pursue it intentionally. He had to withdraw himself to lonely places. The practice, the purpose, the pursuit of solitude for Jesus and hopefully for us.

Well, this episode in **Luke 5** begins with a single man being healed of leprosy. But we know by how this man approaches Jesus that the Lord's reputation as a healer was already spreading even though it was still fairly early in Jesus' ministry. In fact, twice in the previous chapter in **Luke 4**, it tells us that news about Jesus had spread throughout the towns and throughout the countryside. So when this leper saw Jesus, it said, "He fell with his face to the ground and begged him, 'Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean.'" He had no doubt that Jesus could heal him. It's something he had heard so far. But his only question was, "Would Jesus be willing to do so?"

Why would he question that? Well, it seems that Jesus' typical practice in healing people involved him touching them. In the previous chapter, in **Luke 4:40**, "**40** At sunset, the people brought to Jesus all who had various kinds of sickness... " The significance that the sun was setting is that it means the Sabbath was over. So they were now free to travel a greater distance without breaking the law or their traditions of their faith. And so basically, they all came at the first opportunity to come. Kind of like the doors opening at midnight on a Good Friday Sale. Have you seen some of those videos? We don't know the size of the crowd here. But Luke tells us that Jesus laid hands on each one and healed them.

But see, the problem is this man is a leper and it was forbidden to touch someone with leprosy. Or at least to do so made you unclean like they were. So perhaps that's why he's not sure what Jesus will do in his case. That's why he's begging, "If you are willing." Don't you just love Jesus' response? Before he even says anything, he reaches out and touches the man. And then, in this case the man still had any doubt, Jesus said to him, "I am willing to be clean." I love how the contemporary English version puts this exchange. "Lord, you have the power to make me well if only you wanted to." And Jesus put his hand on him and said, "I want to." Hear it well. "I want to."

Do you hear Jesus' heart? And then when the man is instantly healed, it says in **Luke 5:14**, "**14** Then Jesus ordered him, "Don't tell anyone, but go, show yourself to the priest and offer the sacrifices that Moses commanded for your cleansing, as a testimony to them." In Mark's account of this same incident, it's put in even stronger language. Mark in **Mark 1:43-44** says, "**43** Jesus sent him away at once with a strong warning: **44** "See that you don't tell this to anyone. But go, show yourself to the priest... " And then Mark tells us in **Mark 1:45**, " **45** Instead he went out and began to talk freely, spreading the news." So going back to Luke 5, we know why that news about him still continued to spread all the more. So the crowds of people came to hear him and to be healed of their sicknesses.

But Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed. The people kept coming. They wanted Jesus. They wanted his time. They wanted his teaching. They wanted his healing touch. But Jesus didn't always give them what they wanted. Because, as much as he wanted to, he knew what he needed at certain times. He knew he needed solitude. Now in the original Greek in **Luke 16**, the word 'often' is not in the text. That's why, in some of your translations, perhaps the word is in italics to show that it's an addition. But it's an appropriate addition to give the proper sense for a couple of reasons.

First, because the verb 'withdrew' is in the imperfect tense, indicating an ongoing action and not a once-for-all activity. Secondly, it says 'he withdrew to lonely places' in the plural. Pointing out that it's something he obviously did on more than one occasion. There are other references here that we will look at. But there's lots of indication that Jesus practiced solitude as a spiritual exercise or what we might call a holy habit. The first evidence of this is, of course, the 40 days he spent in the wilderness at the very beginning of his ministry right after his baptism. It's how **Luke 4** begins, "**1** Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, left The Jordan and was led by the Spirit into the wilderness, **2** where for forty days he was tempted by the devil."

And then this very significant chapter in the beginning of Jesus' ministry ends with what we find now in **Luke 4:42-44**, "**42** At daybreak, Jesus went out to a solitary place. The people were looking for him and when they came to where he was, they tried to keep him from leaving them. **43** But he said, 'I must proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God to the other towns also, because that is why I was sent. **44** And he kept on preaching in the synagogues of Judea.'" After a long day and evening of ministry, Jesus got up early and went to a solitary place. But apparently it was not solitary enough because the people managed to find him.

Any mother of young children knows exactly what that's like. "Mommy, where are you? Tap Tap, tap. Mommy, are you in there? Why is the door locked?"

Well, the people of Capernaum tried to keep Jesus from leaving them. But he told them essentially, "Sorry, I have a bigger mission here." He left them wanting more. You know, it doesn't matter what kinds of things are vying for our time and our ability to be silent and listen to God. It could be people or work or sports, entertainment, social media. Whatever it is, it will never be satisfied that we have given it enough time. It will always want more. And when I find myself giving in to any of those demanding voices, I can often see that I'm using that form of busyness of one kind or another to hide a sense of emptiness or a lack of meaning or purpose at that moment.

The early morning time of prayer for Jesus, even though it was interrupted eventually still helped him to stay focused on what he had come to do. And he got on with it. Well, let me just skip for a moment to the last of the references listed here. **Luke 22:39**. All four gospels mention the Garden of Gethsemane or the Mount of Olives where Jesus took the disciples the night he was betrayed. But Luke tells us that on that night, Jesus went there as usual. Another subtle indication of Jesus' practice of solitude. Getting away in the dark to a quiet place to pray.

But I want to spend some time on the third reference here in **Luke 9:10-11**. What's happening here is that the apostles had just returned from the mission Jesus had sent them on. He'd sent them out with power. The power to cast out demons, to heal the sick, to preach the gospel of the kingdom. Then, "**10** When the apostles returned, they reported to Jesus what they had done. Then he took them with him and they withdrew by themselves to a town called Bethsaida, **11** but the crowds learned about it and followed him." Here's yet another instance of Jesus seeking to get away and having his solitude disrupted. And how did Jesus respond to his plan for solitude, a time of rest for both him and his disciples? How did he respond to it being thwarted? It goes on to say in **Luke 9:11**, "**11** He welcomed them and spoke to them about the kingdom of God, and healed those who needed healing." And if we continued in the chapter, we would see this ministry lasted all day and ended in Jesus miraculously feeding a multitude of over 5,000.

So three quick lessons from this episode for us. We can expect interruptions and the demands of others to interfere with our plans to find solitude. In fact, we can absolutely count on it happening. And when it happens, instead of being discouraged in our attempts to get away or becoming frustrated with the source of that interruption, we can trust God that if we were counting on that time for strength, we can trust God for him to supply us with strength.

And we can look for ways and opportunities that he's planning to work through us to serve others in those moments. The third thing to notice here, both here and in the garden and in a few other places when Jesus sought solitude, it wasn't always by himself. He took his disciples with him. In fact, there seems to be a pattern that early in his ministry, he mostly went off by himself but as his relationships developed with these men, he began to bring them along so they could also experience solitude. And so they could learn to pray by observing him in prayer. It was in one of those times that they asked him, "Lord, teach us to pray. You pray like we don't pray. Teach us how to pray."

Which brings us into the purposes for solitude. For Jesus, seeking solitude was strategic. It was purposeful. And that purpose always included prayer. Let's just stay with the passage that's in front of us. First of all, to see that for Jesus, one of the benefits of seeking solitude in order to pray was simply to regain his strength physically, emotionally, spiritually. Matthew provides a different context for this retreat that we have here that Jesus made with his disciples. The one that preceded the feeding of the multitude. In **Matthew 14:13**, we have the account that John the Baptist was executed by King Herod and then in verse 13, it says, "**13** When Jesus heard what had happened, he withdrew by boat privately to a solitary place." You can't help but feel the sadness in that statement. When Jesus heard what happened to his cousin, John, to the forerunner to his ministry. Not only the personal sadness, but I'm sure that hearing that news also brought fresh to Jesus his own imminent destiny, what lay ahead for him. And so he sought to get away, to have his strength renewed, to reaffirm his commitment to doing the Father's will, no matter the cost.

Whether he was experiencing popularity and success or encountering hostile opposition. Jesus' go to response to both of those was to seek solitude, to pray to the Father about what was going on externally, and I'm sure internally as well. He was, after all, human and tempted in all points as we are. In fact, there's an interesting detail in Luke 8. It's the story we all know of the woman who had an issue of blood and who came and in the midst of a crowd, reached out and touched Jesus' garment and was instantly healed. Well, Matthew and Mark also recount this episode. All three of these gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, all tell us that Jesus stopped when that happened.

And Jesus said, "Who touched me?" To which the disciples said, "Lord, what a silly question. Everybody's touching you. You're in a crowd." But only Luke tells us in **Luke 8:46**, "**46** But Jesus said, "Someone touched me; I know that power has gone out from me." Is it possible that his strength was diminished in some perceptible way at that moment? And if that's the case, how drained of energy would he be after touching and healing people hour after hour? Whether or not you're able to imagine Jesus being fully human but having limited strength in his human body and soul, we know we certainly do. And in solitude and prayer, our strength is renewed. And with it, our focus on what truly matters is restored. They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength.

Well, the second purpose or benefit of solitude we see in Jesus is the opportunity to receive direction from the Father. In **Luke 6:12-13**, we have this, "**12** One of those days... " One of those days. I'm so glad Jesus also had one of those days. "**12** One of those days Jesus went out to a mountainside to pray, and spent the night praying to God. **13** When morning came, he called his disciples to him and chose twelve of them, whom he also designated apostles:" And then it lists them ending with Judas Iscariot who became a traitor. It seems pretty clear that the focus of his all night prayer vigil was to select from that growing group of disciples, the 12, in whom he would specifically invest so much of the short time he had left on earth. And to whom he would commit the spreading of the gospel and being witnesses to his death and resurrection. Sure, it took all night because he wanted to be sure he knew the Father's will on this. He wanted confirmation he was making the right choices. After all, he had lots of reasons to question the suitability of each and every one of these men. But in fact, on every decision Jesus made, he sought to do only what the Father told him to do.

Do you remember driving somewhere and you're either the driver or passenger and this happens... The driver is going somewhere they've never been before, trying to find a location, maybe in a part of a city or a different city. It's busy, street signs are hard to read. And as he's concentrating, he says, "Please stop talking." Or he turns the radio off. You think, "Well, what does listening to the radio have to do with being able to see street signs?" Of course the issue is, it's about trying to eliminate any extraneous stimuli so your mind can be totally focused on this challenging task at hand. And that's what seeking solitude does for us when we're seeking the Father's will as well. Turning off all of the external stimuli so that we can just be present and hear what God would say to us.

Of all the gospel writers, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, it's interesting that Luke has by far the most to say about prayer, both in terms of how Jesus practiced prayer and also what he had to teach about prayer. Several times when describing an event that Matthew and Mark also include in their gospels, Luke brings out an element related to prayer that's not mentioned by the others. And just one example of that is in the account of the Transfiguration of Jesus that we find starting at **Luke 9:28**. Matthew and Mark simply say that Jesus took Peter and John and James up on the mountain. But it's only Luke who tells us in **Luke 9:28**, "... they went up onto a mountain to pray." And Luke is also the only one who tells us that it was as he was praying that the appearance of his face changed and his clothes became as bright as a flash of lightning. When all is said and done, prayer is about communicating with God and being transformed by that encounter. We seek solitude to simply be in the Father's presence and for him to have our full attention.

The things that happen there on the mountain, first of all, the Father revealing Jesus in all of his glory. And then the Father sent Moses and Elijah. It says in **Luke 9:31**, "**31** They spoke about his departure, which he was about to bring to fulfillment at Jerusalem." About his death that was coming. They must have been sent by the Father to be a source of encouragement to Jesus at that time.

And then thirdly, we have the Father speaking. **Luke 9:35**, "35 A voice came from the cloud, saying, "This is my Son, whom I have chosen; listen to him." The other gospels, and Peter himself, in his accounting in **2 Peter 1:17**, (the Father said), "17 This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased." All of this Jesus received as encouragement and confirmation as he communed with the Father there on the mountain.

Well, now, from all of these accounts we've already looked at, we can put together how Jesus pursued solitude. What steps did you take to make it happen even if it was interrupted on occasion? First of all, it was intentional. Jesus didn't wait until the crowds stopped showing up, until he was less in demand. In fact, the more in demand that he was, the more critical it seemed to be to him to strategically withdraw himself for a time of prayerful solitude. If you wait for the perfect time to begin seeking solitude, you can be sure it will never come.

What then are some practical keys to making the pursuit of solitude successful? Again, like Jesus recognized, it begins with a designated time and a suitable place. First, carve out the time for it. A time when you can minimize distractions. Jesus used the early morning, the evening and on at least one occasion, all night long. Do you suffer from insomnia or you're an early riser? These might work for you. There was a season in my life when I was hosting a call-in television show in the middle of the night that aired from 2am to 4:30 am. I was at a church one time and someone told me they'd seen me. I said, "What in the world are you doing up at 2:00 am?" I knew the usual crowd that called in on that night. He said, "Oh, well, I can't sleep and I turn on some good TV."

So that might work for you. But maybe it won't. Maybe you'll be able to find the time on occasion by skipping a meal or foregoing the usual social engagement or a favorite but non essential activity in your life. Find the time. And secondly, select the place for the same reason. To minimize or eliminate distractions. We see Jesus going to mountaintops, to deserted places, and into a garden for his solitude. It's helpful if you can find a regular place, as Jesus seemed to do, at least for the time that he spent in Jerusalem going to the garden. Gary Thomas suggests it might be a particular room in your house or even a certain chair that becomes a signal both to you and others that when you're in that chair, you're there for a purpose.

The church that I was a part of before I moved back to Canada, we had a week of prayer. You were to sign up and take a slot to pray. And it was a 24 hour prayer. They were encouraging people as much as possible to actually physically come and pray in the church. And at the time, I was caring for my wife with Alzheimer's and didn't get away very much. But I picked a time when I was going to be dropping her off at her daughter's where she was going to be spending the week and I was flying out the next day to come back for a visit to Canada. Well, I don't know about you but whenever I travel, especially by plane, my mind is so full of stuff like, "Have I got everything packed that I'm going to need? Do I have all the documents I'm going to need? Have I set my alarm? Have I set it early enough? Have I given myself enough time to get to the airport?" And all of those things were on my mind as I walked into the church for my time of prayer. And I still remember that as I opened the door and stepped into the prayer room of the church. I was instantly in an attitude of prayer.

I was instantly able to find solitude simply because I had the time. I committed to it and I had a place and it makes a big difference.

Well, I began by acknowledging that at one level, this hardly seems like the season to be talking about the spiritual practice of solitude when we're already either exceedingly busy or painfully lonely. I hope as we've looked at the example we have in Jesus and the purposes it served for him that you're a bit more open to its value for you, not just at some point in a different season, but in fact right now. How many of you either use or at least are familiar with the Lectio 365 Devotional app. Pastor John has mentioned it on occasion. I don't use it all the time but whenever I do, I'm almost always struck by how it begins with these words, "As I enter prayer now, I pause to be still, to breathe slowly, to recenter my scattered senses upon the presence of God. And I can't tell you how many times that phrase 'recenter my scattered senses' instantly makes me aware of just how scattered my senses are. Even in a way that I wasn't realizing.

The demands of the day, the concerns I'm feeling for myself and others. Sometimes there's just a sense of agitation or restlessness that I can't even put my finger on why I'm feeling that. And then the line goes on to say, "... re-center on the presence of God" ...just that phrase, I can just as quickly feel myself settling into this wonderful, wonderful truth. Not just in my head now but in my heart. Yes, I am in the presence of the Father. He is here. I'm not alone. All is well.

Many of you know exactly what I'm talking about because you've been practicing the habit of solitude for many years, perhaps. Let me just encourage you to keep it up. Don't be discouraged if you're in a season where there's more distractions than usual and more demands upon your more limited time and energy. Keep pursuing solitude and prayer.

But for those of us whose feet and hands are busy, whose minds are full of many things, for those whose hearts are heavy, spirits dry, why don't we try withdrawing with Jesus into the solitary places to pray? I believe, once we begin to do it, we will soon find ourselves seeking solitude often.

Let's pray. Father, thank You that, as in all things, Jesus is our wonderful example. How we're encouraged, Lord, to seek solitude for the sake of prayer. To be strengthened, to receive direction, and just simply to commune with You. Stir us, Lord, we pray. We know it's not a matter of making ourselves good enough. You invite us into Your presence because of what Jesus has done for us. You take delight in us because You take delight in your Son, and we are in Him. Help us, Lord. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

Transcribed by: *Liza Perry*